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Jack Anderson

France's Nuclear Firepower

There has been a tendency in recent years not to take France seriously as a major military power. Yet, after some hesitation, the French government responded to U.S. prodding and sent troops to intervene in Chad.

There is more to French military muscle than a few thousand Foreign Legionnaires, though. Most Americans don't realize that France has a formidable nuclear arsenal.

This French strike force can be set in motion by the French themselves, without consulting NATO or the United States, and President Francois Mitterrand is determined to keep things that way.

The Kremlin knows about the growing arsenal of French nuclear weapons. So do the CIA and the Pentagon. Details of the force and evaluations of the French role in a NATO conflict are laid out in a half-dozen highly classified U.S. intelligence documents reviewed by my associate Dale Van Atta.

The theory behind France's determinedly independent nuclear force is simple, if unnerving to those who thought Armageddon could be avoided by using the Washington-Moscow hotline. Paris, the CIA explains, is confident "that it can on its own escalate a European conflict to a nuclear stage and that deterrence in Western Europe is strengthened by this French capability."

The Soviets know that French nukes could destroy at least 30 of their major cities, and the Russians might not make the important distinction that it is non-NATO French missiles that are headed their way. This is why Yuri Andropov insisted last December that the French force be included in the total of Western nuclear weapons—a demand that the independent Mitterrand will not allow.

Mitterrand isn't skimping on his nuclear arsenal. A huge share of his five-year, \$113 billion defense budget is earmarked for expanding and upgrading the nuclear force. To achieve this, Mitterrand is willing to trim his conventional troops by more than 20,000.

How did France become such an influential member of the nuclear club? U.S. officials don't like to admit it, but the French force was developed with important help from the United States. The assistance was authorized in an order, still stamped "Top Secret-Sensitive," signed by Henry Kissinger in 1975.

Like the U.S. arsenal, the French force is a triad of manned bombers, missiles and submarines. There are 34 Mirage IV fighter-bombers assigned to a deep-penetration strategic role. Mitterrand has ordered production of Mirage 2000s to replace these planes. Though their range will be less, the new aircraft will still be able to reach the Soviet Union and drop missiles that can seek their own targets 60 miles farther on.

The French have 18 intermediate-range S3 nuclear missiles in hardened silos at St. Christol. Each has a single one-megaton warhead and a range of about 2,000 nautical miles—more than adequate to reach most of European Russia.

A "reliable source," quoted by the CIA, acknowledged that the land-based French missiles are very vulnerable; their purpose is "to force the enemy to declare himself by destroying them."

Like the United States, France is working on mobile missiles. Because the land-based missiles are so vulnerable, French strategic doctrine "centers on the second-strike capability of ballistic-missile submarines," the CIA reports. The French already have five nuclear subs, each armed with 16 single-warhead missiles with a range of 1,800 miles.

A sixth submarine will be ready by 1985 and a seventh in 1988. The new French subs will be armed with the M-4 multi-warhead missile, which can carry six nuclear warheads to almost twice the range of the present ones. And four of the five existing subs will be retrofitted with the new missile.

This means that by 1992 French submarine-launched missile strength will be at least 592 warheads, compared with the 80 warheads now available. This sevenfold increase is a cause for real concern in Moscow.

On the tactical level, the current French Pluton missiles, with a range of 65 miles, must be deployed in West Germany to hit Soviet-bloc targets. But Mitterrand has quietly ordered the Pluton's replacement with the new Hades missile launcher, which can deliver nuclear bombs from France to Czechoslovakia and East Germany.